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Another San Joaquin Valley Trip

In the March GULL of 1935, there was published an account of birds that I saw in and about Stockton, December 24 to 26, 1934. As I again visited the same territory this year on the same dates, I thought that a comparative account might prove interesting. Along the Borden Highway on December 24th, I saw very few birds, only forty American Egrets, one Red-tailed Hawk, one Marsh Hawk, one Gull, an occasional Coot, Meadowlarks, Brewer and Red-winged Blackbirds. Thousands of sheep and many hogs were feeding in the old corn fields from which the yellow ears of golden flint corn had been gathered and stored in nearby cribs. It seemed incongruous to find a pure white egret, which literature had accustomed us to place in an esthetic background, slowly raise its stately form alongside a large black hog. I turned off at Holt in order to go to the Delta Gun Club property where Commander Parmenter had seen uncountable numbers of Whistling Swans on December 20th. More of the previously flooded land had been drained and walking was difficult. I could hear large numbers of swans calling and soon columns of birds arose from a pond that was protected by tules. Their taking off was accompanied by terrific splashing. The V-shaped groups soon strung out in single file. The birds were constantly calling and they would frequently turn their heads to one side as if carefully watching the ground. They presented a lovely sight in the late afternoon sky. Killdeer were running about and one White-tailed Kite was hovering with rapid wing-beats. On a few of the remaining ponds Pintails, Shovellers and other ducks and coots could be seen. The visibility was trying. In the winter months all through the delta region one has to contend with smoke from the burning of tules, old tomato vines and corn stalks, and fog and cloudy skies.

On Christmas morning I drove to King Island and in the distance could see Little Brown Cranes. After circling the island on the dyke and finding that the best and nearest view could be had from the highway, I parked my car and started across the freshly disked ground. A low, narrow line of green weeds marks the border of the ditches which drain this land and by keeping close to these edges walking is less difficult. By bending over so as not to appear too conspicuous and so that the cranes might take the approaching human to be one of the numerous quadrupeds grazing about, I could get fairly close before they rose into the sky uttering their loud calls. They settled a little beyond the cattle. By jumping across a few more ditches I had one more excellent view before about 150 of these large birds took flight again leaving two small groups of about six birds each. Soon a single bird returned, joined one of the groups and gave a splendid exhibition of its manner of landing. When nearing the ground with outstretched wings, it assumed an almost vertical position, spread legs and toes as far apart as possible and came to rest among its fellows. There were American Egrets and Great Blue Herons scattered about among the cattle and cranes. These birds allowed much closer approach than did the cranes and when aroused would soon return. Several flocks of Canada Geese calling loudly flew overhead. Here again as on the Borden Highway hawks were scarce. Only two Marsh, one Red-tailed and several Sparrow Hawks were noted.

On December 26th I went to Los Banos. Mr. Roy Wattenberger, who is in charge of the refuge, stated that since the close of the hunting season the ducks were leaving but the geese were present in greater numbers. A ride around the refuge proved interesting. As I drove by, suddenly out of the tules, Black-crowned Night Herons, Bittern, and Great Blue Herons would rise. Off the ponds with bold acclaim the Mallards would take off in company with Pintails and Shovellers. American and Snowy Egrets were always in evidence. As the afternoon advanced Canada Geese began arriving. Mr. Wattenberger informed me that after four o'clock many species of geese commenced to come in from their feeding grounds. The outstanding birds were several Gadwalls, some Cinnamon Teal and a few White-faced Glossy Ibis. Two White Pelicans and a flock of some dozen Marbled Godwits added a bit of interest. In flight the Ibis can be distinguished from all other birds of about their size by the peculiar downward curve of their necks. Their heads stretch out straight and the second downward curve in the silhouette is produced by the downward turning bill. Curlew in flight stretch their necks out straight in line with their bodies, the only downward curve being that of their bills.

On the homeward trip at Crow's Landing 125 Yellow-billed Magpies were perched on fences and bare trees. I had never seen such a large close gathering of magpies. Possibly they were going to some night roost.

Junea W. (Mrs. G. Earle) Kelly, Alameda, California. December 30, 1935.

Rainy-day Birding

I have found that rain does not dampen the spirit of nature even though in a physical sense everything is all wet. Rainy days are periods of special activity for certain birds, and activity also on the part of the observer will allow him to observe bird happenings which on sunny days are not to be seen. Therefore, if you have planned a bird-hike on a Saturday or Sunday, rain should not always keep you at home.

December 26, 1935, was an overcast day with occasional showers. I donned my raincoat and took a hike to the hills near Benicia, California, to see what birds were in evidence. Following a cattle trail in the bottom of a canyon, I came upon my first interesting observation of the day. There was a quantity of feathers scattered on the ground which appeared to be from a bird of fairly good size. My first thought was one of fear that someone had shot one of "my" Horned Owls which are resident in this particular canyon and which annually rear two or three little owlets either on a cliff or in a tree in the near vicinity. I picked up a few of the feathers and concluded that they were from a wild duck. This aroused my curiosity as to how wild duck feathers could get into a wooded canyon, in spite of the fact that the Suisun marshes were less than a mile away.

As a little detective work seemed advisable, I looked about for some evidence which might solve the matter. A little to the southwest was a live oak with a dead stub of a limb sticking out horizontally near the top which might serve as a perch for a hawk or owl. The tree's position was towards the direction from which the prevailing winds in this canyon blow, so I concluded that the duck might have been eaten there and the feathers scattered for a distance of a rod or two. I approached the tree, and surely enough, directly under this dead limb was a section of backbone freshly stripped of meat. This had fallen directly down from the perch some twenty-five feet above because of its heavier weight, while the feathers had been carried by the wind considerably to the leeward. In order to secure still further evidence, I climbed the tree, and though the dead limb would not bear my weight, I could see many downy feathers clinging to the bark, where the duck no doubt had been torn apart. I picked up some two dozen of the feathers from the ground, chiefly several lance-shaped rectrices and some of the soft, wavy-barred feathers which had come from the sides of the duck, and later by comparison with a scientific skin, I proved, as I had suspected, that the victim was a drake Pintail.

The question now was—who was the villain in the case? A Western Red-tailed Hawk, also resident in the canyon, might have been suspected by some who know him only as "hen hawk," but with me his reputation is good and I have little evidence which would incriminate him as a bird-killer. Circumstantial evidence was strong against my previously mentioned friend, the Horned Owl, whom I had just a few moments before frightened from a neighboring tree. He was on the scene of the crime, quite wide-awake on this cloud-cast day, and I have found wild-fowl along with other prey in his nest during previous breeding seasons. When stolen property is found in the house of a suspect it is pretty good evidence that he is guilty of its taking.

December 28th was another opportunity for rainy-day birding. My companion and I were in the same general location but in a canyon opposite the one above referred to, when we came upon another mystery. At the base of a live oak was the fresh skin of a common black and white house cat, about half-grown, most of the flesh gone, and alongside it the scattered feathers of a Valley Quail. The skin was perfectly fresh and the solid eyes of the cat indicated a tragedy of only a few hours previous. Evidence was strong again against a Horned Owl, for when we straightened up from investigating the kill, one of these birds left a nearby tree.

I have hopes that some day I may actually see a Horned Owl making his kill, and if this desire is realized it will probably be on one of these rainy-day birding trips. Even though this very interesting large bird is caught "with the goods on him" what should be his punishment for his bird-killing? Strangely (possibly inconsistently) some of us nature lovers do not even criticize him for it. Birds of prey kill for their food, but my contention has always been that man is equally as criminal when killing for food and sport, and we do not condemn man for his meat-eating propensities. If any action should be taken by us concerning our hawks or owls, let it be to lay down our arms, which have already been lifted too long against them.

Emerson A. Stoner, Benicia, California. January 26, 1936.

Golden Gate Park, San Francisco

The July field trip was taken on the 12th to Golden Gate Park, San Francisco. The day was ideal, sunny, quite warm, a slight breeze and not many people abroad considering the weather and season. There were many birds to be seen of such species as flock, and there never was a moment when our attention wasn't called to some bird close at hand. It was all that one could have wished if we had had a class of beginners along.

The group assembled at Forty-third Avenue and Fulton Street at 10 a. m., and instead of staying on the Chain of Lakes path we stepped back of the road a number of times and were well rewarded in finding a good number of birds. We had luncheon at 12 o'clock and elected to eat it while sitting on that point of land on the south shore of Middle Lake that almost cuts the lake in two.

Leaving Middle Lake, we went over to the Buffalo Paddock, where only Juncos, House Finches, Brewer Blackbirds and one Vigors Wren were seen; then along Spreckels Lake, where one Canvas-back Duck, which has been there for some time, and one Coot were seen. Continuing on to Lloyd Lake, Mallards were seen, including three broods of various ages, one just out of the shell, eight in the brood; and lastly to Stow Lake, where there were Mallards, three beautiful male Ruddies; Coots with young almost full grown and one brood of two that still had their orange-colored bills. On the Chain of Lakes there were no other birds than Mallards.

The outstanding event of the trip, to me, was the Mourning Doves. I saw five at one time, then two shortly after, but I could not be sure the last two made seven or were a part of the first five.

Eight members attending were: Mesdames Clear, Courtright; Misses Berg, Cohen, Danz, Uniacke; Messrs. Myers and C. R. Thomas. Six guests were: Mrs. C. S. S. Dutton; Miss Stanton; Scouts Casey, Boyt, Blount, Westerfeld.

The list of birds seen is as follows:

Mallard
Canvas-back Duck
Ruddy Duck
California Quail
Coot
Western Gull
Mourning Dove
Anna Hummingbird
Allen Hummingbird
Red-shafted Flicker
Willow Woodpecker
Black Phoebe
Western Flycatcher
Olive-sided Flycatcher
Chickadee
Bush-tit
House Wren
Vigors Wren
Western Robin
Russet-backed Thrush
Yellow Warbler
Pileolated Warbler
English Sparrow
Brewer Blackbird
Purple Finch
House Finch
Green-backed Goldfinch
Spotted Towhee
Point Pinos Junco
Nuttall Sparrow
Song Sparrow

Christine Danz, Leader and Historian.

Audubon Notes

August Meeting: The regular meeting will be held on Thursday, the 13th, at 8 p. m., room 19, Ferry Building.

The speaker of the evening will be Mr. James Moffitt, Curator of Ornithology, California Academy of Sciences, whose subject will be "Nesting Canada Geese in California." The lecture will be illustrated.

August Field Trip: The trip this month will be taken to a new place, Frank Valley, Marin County, on Sunday, the 16th. Take the 8:45 Sausalito Ferry and purchase round-trip ticket to Mill Valley, price 53 cents. Leader, Miss Papina.

Observations: Commander and Mrs. Parmenter report one Hudsonian Curlew, 25 Avocets and one Black-necked Stilt, on the Alvarado marsh, June 12th; six Long-billed and sixteen Hudsonian Curlews on Mountain View marshes, July 9th; one Heermann Gull, June 17th, and thirty or more by the 30th at the Cliff House; two Caspian Terns, San Andreas Lake, June 20th and 26th, and one, Crystal Springs Lake, on the 26th.

Correction: In the July issue of the GULL, page 4, next to the last line, "one original stone engraving" should read one copperplate engraving.

Audubon Association of the Pacific

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For the Study and the Protection of Birds

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